



BLOG

An Elite Diaspora: A lost generation of Chinese leaders

By **Willy Xiao** | July 27, 2015

“**Y**ou know Willy, if your mom had stayed in China, she probably could’ve been quite high up in Central Government.”

“Pop.” Three years of stale air discharge as friends of thirty years reconvene.

The cork lands on the host’s polished granite counter-top, and the wine breathes, inhaling air tinged with the scent of tossed-salad paired with lamb-shank and expunging an even more complex aroma of cabernet sauvignon dashed with vanilla extract. I sit a little lower in my seat, shoulders resting a solid inch lower than usual. The host seems pretty normal at first. He’s a Chinese immigrant with a wife and two kids and is an Engineer in Silicon Valley.

He proudly points to the wine’s label: “Produced by the Li Family 2012: Limited 15 bottles.” He has a four-acre vineyard behind his home where the grapes were harvested; it sits next to the fishpond that he dug up himself. In fact, he built the entire house himself. Showing off the intricately carved columns and the mysteriously acquired 200 year old dressers in his bedroom as he walks us through his home, he tells us stories of construction; we hear of how he wrestled permits from city council, tried to avoid tearing down his neighbors homes with a Caterpillar bulldozer, and put his mechanical engineering degree to use in welding his custom kitchen sink.

As he rambles on, I quickly realize that he may be the closest version of the Dos Equis ‘Most Interesting Man in the World’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3VLJjdjbxw>) that I have ever personally encountered.

In college, he once went to a wedding in a rural Chinese village where he got a stomach virus and subsequently decided that he would be unable to single-handedly unify the country behind the central government.

While living in Switzerland in the winter of '93, he couldn't get a French visa for a business meeting, so he stole into the country by 540 tail-grabbing over the highest peak of a Swiss ski resort.

He now walks his dog without a leash and has been involved in at least two foot-chases with the local Palo Alto police department. He seeks the wisdom of three Indian Gurus in the Bay Area on a regular basis, one of which has been said never to sleep; instead, he meditates with both eyes wide open throughout the night.

All of this is real.



Photo courtesy of Willy Xiao.

My family had come to visit me for the week in the Bay Area. Having both attended the engineering powerhouse Tsinghua University (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsinghua_University), a Chinese equivalent of MIT, my parents at this point still have more friends in Silicon Valley than I, so we spent much of the week touring the various homes of their college classmates. Here, on a Wednesday night after work (<https://www.facebook.com/harvardindependent/posts/10153358508875708>), I find myself situated at a dinner table in the home of Mr. Li who is one such college classmate. My mother had neither seen nor spoken in person to either Mr. Li or his wife

for over thirty years, and in the western-most state of the western-most country on a world map, while drinking wine made by Mr. Li in a house that he built with his own two hands, they reminisced over the Tsinghua Electrical Engineering Class of '81.

The dinner conversation revolved, of course, around Mr. Li's shenanigans, but it also fell upon the many classmates and memories they shared since before the Tiananmen Square Massacre of '89, which induced a mass exodus of my parent's friends. Surprisingly Mr. Li, despite my previous superlative labeling him as the *most* interesting man, does not occupy a lonely pedestal of interesting life-stories by way of my parent's classmates. One became the President of Microsoft's China branch. Two have entered the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politburo_of_the_Communist_Party_of_China). Another owns one of the largest production lines for counterfeit Chinese soft-drink brands, of which he frequently posts pictures on We Chat groups. Yet another is in jail for investing public funds in the stock market for personal gain. This is the short-list of classmates who frequently come up – those who have sustained at least a few minutes of fame in the Chinese Central Television's nightly broadcast, while many more 'hot-shot' classmates lurk in the backwaters of their conversation.

As discussion turns to one of these classmates, another dinner guest remembers, "Man, I used to live in a bunk bed with him when we were six people in a 200 sq-ft dorm. When he first got locked up were like, shit, he was a pretty nice guy." From around the room, the armchair philosophers begin to pipe in with a view for which my mother has gained a small following on social media:

"I always say there's a fine line between the most successful people and the prisoners. Sometimes, it's just a matter of luck between making it big and falling into a well." Mr. Li, who is the best English speaker of the group, adds for the American-born kids in the room, "It's as if God rolls a dice, and our lives succumb to the number facing up."

Regardless of the implications of this belief, a pervading theme throughout the discussions was the kinship and almost indistinguishable differences that the members of Tsinghua Electrical Engineering '81 shared with their classmates now in the public eye. You could've easily taken those more famous ones and replaced them with the fifty-somethings sitting to my left and to my right at the dinner table. As a twenty-one year-old Harvard student, I looked at my parents friends from when they were in their twenties, a set of people who at one point in their lives were slated to be the next generation of rising political, business, and academic leaders of China, a generation of which upwards of half of its most educated decided to go abroad.

They bantered, and they remembered, and they joked. And every once in a while my mother would chime in with an update, "oh yeah, we also like to go to Farmer's Market every second Sunday of the month." My dad speaks up, "Yeah, Willy's pretty into Boy Scouts, I recommend it for your kids." As the daytime turns to night this rag-tag group of Chinese-accented English speakers drink Red Wine instead of Bai-Jiu, fact-check each other through Google instead of Baidu, and exchange stories about Boy Scouts instead of the Red Guards ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Guards_\(China\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Guards_(China))). Here is the soul of China's could-have-been political, financial, and socially elite class, now turned diaspora across the globe. Having chosen cleaner air, better healthcare, and having two kids in little neighborhoods over the tumultuous ebbs and flows of the political factions and financial tides of the Motherland, they smile and laugh and tell stories of another life.

Willy Xiao is enjoying his family's company and striving to become more like the Most Interesting Man in the World.

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